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profile

Hadley Cantril
Perception, Polling, and Policy Research

Albert H. Cantril

Hadley Cantril (1906-1969) was part of the second generation of modern social psychology in the United States coming into its own in the mid-1930s. Social psychologists at the time were charting a course between the perspectives of sociology and individual psychology. Neither perspective, in their judgment, adequately accounted for how and why individuals act as they do in social situations. On the one hand, social forces could not be understood solely in terms of social structure and organization. On the other hand, existing theories of individual psychology downplayed the social setting as a factor in explaining human behavior.

The operating premise of social psychology was that human behavior cannot be understood independent of the social setting in which it takes place *and* that the social setting itself cannot be understood independent of the diverse ways unique individuals relate to it.

Challenge for Social Psychology

Along with many of his contemporaries, Hadley Cantril was uneasy with what social psychologist Gordon W. Allport referred to as the "simple and sovereign" theories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that saw human behavior as animated by some single explanation such as a hedonistic search for pleasure or a ceaseless quest for power. They thought such single-explanation theories did not speak plausibly to the variety and frequent spontaneity of the individual's actions in a social setting.

Three theoretical perspectives prominent at the time were not, in Cantril's judgment, up to the challenges social psychology was taking on. First, behaviorism with its focus on the physiological responses of laboratory animals to rewards and punishments was too removed from the varied and multifaceted social settings in which human beings live.

Second, the Freudian idea that life was an unending struggle to contain one's instinctual energies failed to capture the individual's ability to grow and to develop new values through participation in social life. Third, the theory that behavior is controlled by a fixed number of drives innate to humankind seemed to deny people the opportunity to mature as they go through life and become motivated by emerging interests often quite distinct from what prompted their earlier behavior.

The challenge as Cantril saw it was that "behavior at any one moment must be regarded as a function of the environment and the particular pattern of predispositions influencing the individual at that moment." Needed were concepts that saw the individual's "mental context" and social setting as completely interdependent—one making sense only by taking the other into account.

Cantril was especially influenced in this conception of psychology's task by Allport, his mentor first at Dartmouth College in the late 1920s and a few years later at Harvard where Cantril completed one of the university's first dissertations in social psychology. The issues social psychology was wrestling with in the 1930s were of more than academic interest. These were years of considerable uncertainty. At home, the country was still trying to regain its footing after the dislocations of the Great Depression. Unemployment, declining production, and falling prices had left in their wake profound inequities, which fueled public discontents that often spilled over into resentments based on race or national origin. At the same time, a sense of foreboding was gripping the country as clouds of war were gathering over Europe. By mid-1941, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and Belgium were all under German control. France would soon petition Hitler for an armistice and the siege of Britain was only months away.

World events were making clear to Cantril and his contemporaries that the questions social psychology was attempting to answer were vital to the preservation of individual liberties and the American way of life. If not social psychology, what field of inquiry could shed light on why people often act differently in social situations than when alone, thereby sometimes becoming part of something much larger than themselves? In the extreme and frightening case the world was then confronting, the question was why were so many drawn to the appeals of an Adolf Hitler?

Psychology of Panic

It was in such unsettled times that Cantril conducted what would become his classic study of the panic following the Orson Welles broadcast of the *War of the Worlds* on Halloween night in 1938. An estimated million listeners across the country were frightened as they heard seemingly authentic news reports of Martians landing on a farm in Grovers Mill, New Jersey, and "strange creatures...unleashing their deadly assault."

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Seeing the potential for an empirical study of the psychology of panic, Cantril quickly organized a team of interviewers to conduct intensive interviews with 135 listeners, at least 100 of whom had been unnerved by the broadcast. The question was why some thought they were hearing an account of Martians actually bearing down on New York City when the circumstances being "reported" were so fanciful.

As Cantril reported in *The Invasion from Mars* (1940, 2005), those most likely to be taken in by the broadcast tended to have less formal education than others or had missed announcements at the beginning of the show thereby not getting word that they were listening to a radio drama. But it would take more to explain what was going on because not everyone with less education or who had tuned in late believed what they were hearing.

Cantril found those who had been genuinely frightened shared certain personality characteristics. These included a lack of self-confidence, an overbearing amount of personal worry, deep religious belief, and a sense of fatalism. While none of these characteristics alone explained listeners' reactions to the broadcast, taken together they identified people more likely than others to perceive a crisis situation in which they were being overwhelmed by forces beyond their control. Cantril referred to this combination of characteristics as a personality trait of "susceptibility" which led them to believe "what they heard without making sufficient checks to prove to themselves that the broadcast was only a story."

No sooner had he completed *The Invasion from Mars* than he turned his attention to what would become *The Psychology of Social Movements* (1941, 2002). With fascism taking root in Germany and Italy, the haunting question was whether something similar could happen in the United States.

To shed light on this possibility, Cantril looked at why people were drawn to five social movements. These included members of lynching mobs in the American south in the 1930s, followers of the Nazi Party in Germany, and three other movements in the United States. In all cases, Cantril found people felt their economic well-being was being threatened. Each social movement was preying on these insecurities by simplifying the problems faced, identifying some individual or group that was purportedly to blame, and offering specific steps followers could take to redress the situation.

The question was why those enlisting in a social movement responded with such intensity to the vision of a new order being offered by the movement's leaders. Was there any common pattern in the psychological processes at work even though the five movements differed in content? Cantril uncovered striking similarities. Most signing on to a movement's agenda had nothing in their past experience to which they could turn to make sense of the adversities they thought they were encountering. Cantril wrote that these individuals had no relevant "frame of reference" to provide a basis for second-guessing what they were being told. By frame of reference, Cantril was referring to the "generalized points of view" through which people perceived the world. These frames of reference are built on "standards

of judgment" which are the values and assumptions we learn early in life.

Absent reliable assumptions to lend meaning to the social environment, people faced what Cantril referred to as "critical situations." These critical situations may make individuals "suggestible" to the appeals of a social movement either because they "have no adequate mental context" for interpreting what is going on, or because their view of things is "so rigidly fixed" that they disregard important information that may be available to them.

In addition to attempting to make sense of the forces shaping world events at the time, *The Psychology of Social Movements* can be appreciated as an important step in the evolution of Cantril's thinking. The theoretical framework used in the study of panic reflected Allport's emphasis on traits in accounting for differences in the way individuals responded to the Welles broadcast. The social movements study, however, demonstrated to Cantril that traits were not sufficient to explain why thousands of people enlist in the ranks of some all-consuming cause. Accordingly his attention turned to the decisive role past experience plays in the process by which people develop the standards of judgment they use as yardsticks in sizing up the world around them.

In short, two ideas were becoming central in Cantril's understanding of human perception. First, perception could be understood only to the extent that the individual's "mental context" and the social setting are seen as interdependent. Second, psychology should appreciate the individual's capacity and desire to learn from experience and introspection, thereby breaking free from rigid theories that posited drives, repressed energies, an innate ego, or a Gestalt or inherent patterning in perception.

Opinion Research as a Tool

Cantril's research on the psychology of panic and social movements affirmed his sense that the emerging methods of public opinion research held considerable promise for the field of social psychology especially if they could shed light on the frames of reference through which people view the world.

But social psychology at the time was still relying on the case study method and controlled experiments for its empirically based insights. The idea of interviewing a cross-section of a population had not yet taken hold in the field. Polling had been underway in advertising research and by George Gallup for syndication to newspapers. Academic social psychology, however, had not yet seen its potential.

The promise of opinion research had been on Cantril's mind since 1936 when he was asked by the *New York Times* to write several articles on the polls being conducted prior to the 1936 elections. In the course of preparing these articles, he conducted several interviews with Gallup who was extraordinarily forthcoming. The two became close friends and subsequently collaborated on many projects over the years. In fact, proximity to Gallup's organization was a significant consideration in Cantril's decision to accept an appointment in the psychology department at Princeton University later that year.

Whatever potential opinion polling might hold for social psychology, however, Cantril knew that there were basic issues that had to be sorted out regarding the reliability and validity of the new method. He was able to secure funding from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1940 to establish the Office of Public Opinion Research (OPOR) within Princeton's School of Public Affairs.

The OPOR pursued several objectives. First, it assessed different techniques for measuring public opinion such as how questions are worded, the importance of training interviewers, and the reliability of small samples. A second objective was to explore the psychological aspects of public opinion—or what Cantril called the "determinants" of opinion. On the agenda here were monitoring trends to see when and how opinions change, examining differences of view among subgroups in the population, gauging the intensity of opinions, and looking at the influence of information on opinions held. Many of these OPOR studies are described in *Gauging Public Opinion* (1944) by Cantril and his OPOR colleagues.

Finally, Cantril thought OPOR should build an archive of public opinion data to be available for the research community. In addition to all OPOR surveys, the archive grew to include data from Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion and the National Opinion Research Center, among other organizations. Cantril later transferred these holdings to Williams College as one of the building blocks of its new Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. The Roper Center is now located at the University of Connecticut in Storrs. With Mildred Strunk, Cantril also compiled hundreds of poll findings from OPOR and other organizations in *Public Opinion: 1935-1946* (1951).

Because of the frequency of its surveys, the Office of Public Opinion Research was able to follow changes in opinion and explore what explained the views of the American public. As the war spread across Europe, it became clear to Cantril that information being gathered by OPOR could be of considerable importance to decision makers in Washington.

In particular, he was concerned by poll results indicating that Americans were not prepared for what the looming war could require of the United States. He arranged a meeting in the fall of 1940 with Lowell Mellett, one of President Franklin Roosevelt's "anonymous assistants." Mellett was extremely interested in findings Cantril reported as well as suggestions for how the president might deal with the situation. Thus began a steady flow of polling information and counsel to the Roosevelt administration that would last until mid-1945.

Since this was the first time an American president was receiving empirical information about public opinion on a regular basis, there was no model upon which to build. FDR and his advisers had little experience as consumers of polls and had to learn the potential of opinion data as the process unfolded. For his part, Cantril had to anticipate when and how polling information might be important for the White House and then convey that information in an unencumbered fashion. His memos tended to be direct and short and highlighted the implications as well as the limitations of findings being presented.

Among Cantril's many reports, the White House was particularly interested in results from questions that were repeated every few months regarding the American public's view of the war. During 1940 and most of 1941, these questions focused on how far the United States should go in helping England and in trying to contain Japanese territorial ambitions in Southeast Asia. After the United States declared war on Japan and Germany, the OPOR's polls repeated questions regarding the public's sense of the course of the war: who would win, whether people felt they had a clear idea of what the war was about, and how far the government should go in asking people to make sacrifices for the war effort. Trends in these poll results were plotted on bar charts that were kept in the White House and updated as new results came in.

Cantril referred frequently to his confidence in the judgment of the American people—provided they are given enough information on which to base their opinions. Many of his memos for the White House explored what the public knew about the issue at hand and recommended areas where FDR could spell out particular challenges the country was facing as the war progressed.

In 1943, Cantril and the OPOR were asked by the State Department to conduct surveys regarding the American public's reaction to events and views on a wide range of topics such as support for the idea of a United Nations. As World War II drew to a close, Cantril was eager to return to his primary interest, systematic social psychology, and, in 1945, helped transfer OPOR's work for the State Department to the National Opinion Research Center now located at the University of Chicago.

Ames and Livingston

Cantril resumed full-time teaching in Princeton's psychology department in 1945 and soon began work with Muzafer Sherif on what would become *The Psychology of Ego-Involvements* (1947). He continued to think the matter of perception was central to the agenda of social psychology. Many questions remained unanswered in accounting for the interplay between an individual's motivation at a given point in time and the social world in which the individual was living.

An event that brought things together for Cantril with particular clarity was his introduction to the work of Adelbert Ames, Jr. In 1946, John Dickey, president of Dartmouth College, asked Cantril to gauge the significance for psychology of research in visual perception being conducted by Ames at the Dartmouth Eye Institute.

The Institute's primary purpose had been basic research in physiological optics to help diagnose complex forms of vision impairment. But Ames' extraordinary imagination had led him to see possible implications of the work in optics for a larger understanding of human perception. He was especially fascinated with the process by which individuals assign significance to the images that appear on the retinas of their eyes.

Ames had found it useful to illustrate his insights about perception through what he called "demonstrations." These were actually experimental situations in which the physical properties of objects could be varied to illustrate the role of an individual's assumptions and intentions in shaping what the individual "sees." After being guided through the demonstrations by Ames one

day in the summer of 1946, Cantril knew that this was work of great importance. As he later recounted the visit: "It seemed to me that here, at long last, there were concrete illustrations of phenomena that we had been clumsily trying to spell out and investigate in the arena labeled 'social psychology.' Here, for example, one was presented with demonstrations, rather than arguments, showing the interdependencies between our perceptions, our actions, and our purposes.... The phenomena I experienced...provided me one of the most exciting days of my life, confirming as they seemed to in simple and direct fashion the fact that our perceptions, our attitudes, our prejudices are learned significances for purposive behavior, significances which we ourselves have created in order to act effectively and which we are unlikely to alter unless and until our action is frustrated or our purposes change."

The day was a turning point in Cantril's career, leading to a collaboration with Ames that would last until Ames' death in 1955. Countless days were spent as the two worked to bridge the gap between the "naive experience" of viewing the demonstrations and a conceptual formulation that would describe the processes involved as the individual ascribes significance to what is "seen." In addition, a team of Cantril's colleagues at Princeton expanded upon Ames' original work, conducting further experiments with the demonstrations.

Perhaps best known of the demonstrations is the "distorted room." The version used in most of the research appears to viewers as a small rectangular room about four feet wide, deep, and high. It is observed from a sitting position by placing one's head at a designated spot in a headrest similar to that in an optician's office. Instead of being "normal," however, the room is distorted. Its left wall is about twice the size of its right wall. As a result the ceiling slants up to the left, the floor drops down on the left, and the rear wall extends farther back on the left to accommodate the larger left wall.

When viewed from the designated spot, the image on one's retina is exactly the same as would be the case were the room perfectly square. The reason the distorted room looks normal is the strength of viewers' assumptions that the floor and ceiling are level and that the walls are upright. After all, this has been our experience when walking into rooms. We do not encounter rooms in our everyday lives in which the floor slants dramatically in one direction or another.

Highlighting the power of the assumption of squareness is the fact that if people step back and take in the unusual contours of the room, they still perceive a normal room when returning to the designated viewing spot. In other words, knowing intellectually that the room is distorted is not sufficient to shake the assumption of squareness that is "seen."

What happens, however, when people act in the room, such as by trying to touch various spots on the walls with a pointer? Invariably they miss the mark initially. Spots on the right wall are much closer to the viewer than they appear. Similarly spots on the left wall are further away. With enough practice, however, those acting in the room start picking up the nature of the distortion. At first they start to take "give-away" cues into account such as specks from uneven painting here or there. Then they begin to revise their assumption about squareness. Eventually they see the room for what it is. Similar results emerged from experiments with a larger version of the distorted room that people can enter, discovering in the process a slanted floor and ceiling.

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Why was the distorted room significant for social psychology? Because it and related demonstrations underscored the fundamental interdependence of individual and environment. One cannot understand a person's perception of a situation without appreciating the assumptions they bring to that situation and the intentions they may have at the time. In turn, those assumptions may or may not hold up when the person acts on them in the situation. Only by experiencing the consequences of one's assumptions in the effort to fulfill some purpose can real learning be said to be taking place.

Thus, Ames and Cantril understood perception to be a process in which people "transact" with the environment rather than "interact" with it. "Transaction" in this context was new to the vocabulary of psychology, although it had been carefully elaborated as a philo-

sophical concept a few years earlier by John Dewey and Arthur Bentley. Common parlance usually relied on "interaction" to describe the way humans operated in the environment. The problem was that "interaction" stressed a distinction between the individual and the environment and conceived of psychology as the study of the effects of one on the other. But as Cantril observed, this "greatly oversimplifies and distorts the existing situation" since the environment "is something *through* which we act and which takes on significance only through action in it."

In the "transactional" approach, the perceived environment would not exist *except for* the significance individuals attribute to what comes in through their senses about that environment. And there would be no basis for their attributing significance *except for* their past experience when acting in the environment. As he wrote in 1955, "it can be demonstrated that the attributes which we assign to the 'things' outside of ourselves...are significances which we build up in the course of our experience...." These significances pertain to objects, people we encounter, our own actions, the sequence of events, and the values that guide many of the choices we make.

The research literature since the Ames-Cantril collaboration provides ample confirmation of the interdependence of the individual and the environment. In fact, the influence of transactional ideas is seen in the emerging resolution of a tension between two contemporary schools of thought in the field. One perspective holds that social behavior is shaped by predispositions individuals bring to social encounters. The other perspective looks outside the individual to such things as peer pressure and group influences on behavior. The transactional insight is that neither perspective is sufficient because both individual and situational factors are at work and neither would be as it is without the other.

Cantril saw immense implications of the concept of transaction for what is meant by the terms "mind" and "self." A major development in this regard was his introduction in the early 1960s to the work of William K. Livingston, a neuroscientist at the University of Oregon Medical School. Livingston had been developing what he called "transactional" neurology. Its basic idea was that the brain and central nervous system process information coming in through the senses in large part on the basis of assumptions built up through experience.

Cantril and Livingston were brought together by Alan Gregg who headed the medical division of the Rockefeller Foundation. He had made grants to both men at various points over the years. When he found both were using "transactional" to describe their work, he knew they had to be introduced. It turned out neither had been aware of the work of the other and both were excited to learn of the other's inquiries.

In a collaboration as rich as that earlier with Ames, Cantril outlined a book with Livingston that would set forth a theoretical framework bringing together the threads of their independent work. Livingston died in 1966 and Cantril three years later. The direction the book would have taken, however, is clear from three articles during this period appearing in *Psychology, Humanism, and Scientific Inquiry: The Selected Essays of Hadley Cantril* (1988).

Perception, Polling, and International Affairs

Hadley Cantril's interests in perception, public opinion, and international affairs converged at many points in the postwar years. He thought the chances of U.S. foreign policy succeeding could be increased in most instances if it took into account "the psychological dimension"—understanding the state of mind of those elites and publics with whom the United States was trying to communicate. Once the strategic outlines of some policy have been formulated, he argued, the next "indispensable step is to translate these long-range policy aims into psychological objectives." These objectives can then provide the framework within which American policy can most effectively be presented. Cantril's account of many of his studies along these lines, including the polling for FDR during World War II, appears in *The Human Dimension: Adventures in Policy Research* (1967).

An early project in this facet of Cantril's work resulted from his acceptance of an invitation from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1948 to chair a panel of social scientists to examine the sources of tensions among nations. The panel's report, *Tensions that Cause Wars* (1950), highlighted among other things the pervasive influence of symbols and traditions wrapped up in national identities that inhibit "the free movement of thought across boundaries of what is, in fact, an interdependent world." The UNESCO project also involved surveys "into the conceptions which the people of one nation entertain of their own and of other nations."

Surveys were conducted in the United States, Mexico, Australia, and six European countries in 1948-49. The results are reported by Cantril and William Buchanan in *How Nations See Each Other* (1953).

In a related vein Cantril became concerned that postwar U.S. information programs for international audiences were not being effective. He thought it would be possible to gauge the reactions of these audiences to different ways the United States could make its case to the world. To demonstrate the potential he interested the State Department in funding surveys in Italy and Holland to test the relative persuasiveness of eleven ways the United States could promote the then fledgling North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

In 1955, Cantril resigned as Stuart Professor and chairman of the psychology department at Princeton to join long-time friend Lloyd A. Free in establishing the Institute for International Social Research. Under a grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Institute launched a program of research to understand how people in different settings around the globe perceived their own personal situation as well as that of their country.

The scale was self-anchoring in that respondents were asked to describe in their own words what the ideal and worst state of affairs would be like.

The Institute conducted surveys of elite and public opinion in a wide range of countries at all levels of economic development and operating under different political systems. Early surveys, reported in *The Politics of Despair* (1958), focused on the discontent of French and Italian voters.

Later Institute surveys were designed around the "self-anchoring striving scale" that Cantril devised. The scale was self-anchoring in that respondents were asked to describe in their own words what the ideal and worst state of affairs would be like. They were then shown a picture of a ten-step ladder and asked where they thought they were at present between the ideal they had just described (top of the ladder) and the worst possible situation (bottom of the ladder). Ratings for the past and future then gauged how far people thought they had come from their rating for the present and what they thought might lie ahead. Comparisons across countries and cultures were possible because all respondents used the same ladder scale yet "anchored" ratings in their own conception of the ideal and worst situations. Cantril brought results of these surveys in thirteen countries together in *The Pattern of Human Concerns* (1965).

A survey of American opinion in the series uncovered the paradox that many people who have general views about government that would be described as "conservative" *also* have views about the specific activities of government that would be described as "liberal." Cantril wrote up the study with Free in *The Political Beliefs of Americans* (1968).

Psychology and Humanism

A central theme running through Cantril's work was that a challenge for psychology was to develop an understanding of human nature that has a naturalistic foundation yet encompasses the full range of human experience. That is, psychological theory must be fully consistent with scientifically established propositions about the nature of human experience. At the same time, however, psychology should not shy away from those aspects of experience usually considered more the province of the philosopher, the artist, or the theologian.

Much of Cantril's writings in the 1950s and 1960s dealt with the tensions inherent in this view of psychology's task. On the one hand, he was critical of formulations that, in an attempt to be scientific, focused on "partial problems in precise ways." On the other, he was skeptical of extrapolations from essentially existential concepts about the nature of human experience without adequate consideration of "the possibility of any naturalistic bases for speculation."

By insisting on an approach that is both naturalistic in its foundation and holistic in its scope, the challenge of advancing systematic social psychology is made considerably more difficult. To devise theoretical constructs, abstractions about human experience must be derived in such a way that they do not compromise the nature of that experience. As he put it:

"The task of starting with naive experience and formulating systematic constructs on the basis of naive experience is a particularly difficult undertaking. For the very essence of living is its unity and flow. Yet in order to get any grasp of this most complicated subject matter and to communicate this understanding to others, the psychologist is forced to break up into distin-

guishable parts what really constitutes an indivisible, functional aggregate; he is forced to consider separately the various aspects of living which are all interrelated and interdependent and none of which would function as they do except for all the others."

Cantril saw the need for concepts that would bridge the domains of "scientific" psychology and humanistic inquiry. Perhaps the most important bridging concept in his mind was "value satisfaction," which derives from the uniquely human capacity to attribute "value significance" to experience. By this he meant the individual's ability to experience satisfaction in a situation because of some value intrinsic to it—the beauty of a sunset, the reality of faith, the abiding love for a partner, the satisfaction of a job well done. It is the capacity to sense such "value attributes" of experience, he wrote, that accounts for humankind's "ceaseless striving, search for direction, and characteristic unwillingness to have things remain as they are."

Cantril lived to see many transactional ideas take hold. In his later years, he was particularly excited by developments in the neurosciences that were confirming the transactional understanding of the perceiving individual and the environment as interdependent—each playing a role in shaping the other.

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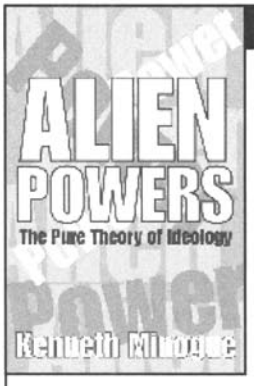
Albert H. Cantril, son of Hadley and Mavis Cantril, is an independent public opinion analyst. Among his books are Reading Mixed Signals: Ambivalence in American Public Opinion about Government *(with Susan Davis Cantril) and* The Opinion Connection: Polling, Politics, and the Press. *He has conducted numerous studies for nonprofit organizations and governmental agencies. He was on the White House staff during the Johnson administration and later served in the State Department. He gratefully acknowledges the many contributions of his wife and colleague Susan Davis Cantril in the conception and preparation of this profile.*



Alien Powers

The Pure Theory of Ideology

Kenneth Minogue

The term "ideology" can cover almost any set of ideas, but its power to bewitch political activists results from its strange logic: part philosophy, part science, part spiritual revelation, all tied together in leading to a remarkable paradox—that the modern Western world, beneath its liberal appearance, is actually the most systematically oppressive system of despotism the world has ever seen. *Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology* takes this complex intellectual construction apart, analyzing its logical, rhetorical, and psychological devices and thus opening it up to critical analysis. For Minogue, **emeritus professor of political science at the London School of Economics and Political Science**, the complex task of "demystifying" the "demystifiers" requires that we should discover how ideology works. It must join together each of its complex strands of thought in order to understand the remarkable power of the whole.

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